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Cambridge man reported held in Kabul

Friends, business associates say rug merchant was arrested Feb. 23

By Ben Barber
Special to The Globe

A carpet merchant from Cambridge who reportedly vanished recently in Kabul, Afghanistan, is being held by Russian or Afghan authorities, according to friends and business associates.

Rug dealer Charles Brockunier was arrested Feb. 23, according to acquaintances of his who were interviewed in Cambridge yesterday. State Department officials have begun secretive efforts to secure his release, sources said.

A business associate of Brockunier's said he had recently spoken by telephone with friends in Afghanistan who confirmed to him "positively" that Brockunier had been arrested, though it was not known in which jail he was being held.

Brockunier, a 41-year-old Harvard graduate and former history teacher, was drawn to the turbulent Asian country by his concern for Afghan friends and a desire to purchase carpets for his Cambridge shop before nationalization might cut off access to rug markets, they said. Brockunier is part owner of the Turkoman Balouch Rugs shop on Arrow street.

Brockunier's mother, Barbara Brockunier of Cambridge, has been contacted by the State Department, but she said yesterday she had been asked not to comment on what efforts were being made to free her son.

The tall, red-bearded Brockunier left Cambridge in late January, telling a friend that he intended to travel by bus among the people, as had been his custom since he first visited Afghanistan in 1972. He had traveled there every two or three months for the past three years to supply his shop with carpets. The last trip previous to this one was made in November, before the Soviet invasion but during the troubled pro-Moscow regime of Hafizullah Amin, who was killed when the Soviets invaded in late December.

One person associated with the rug shop, who asked not to be identified, said Brockunier intended to buy up to \$20,000 worth of the colorful brown and red hand-knotted carpets to replace stock sold during Christmas.

Don Meier, an employee at the shop and a personal friend of Brockunier, said he had received reports from sources in London that the merchant was seized at his hotel following participation in a street demonstration

"which he may have been forced to join."

Brockunier had been staying at Kabul's Khorason Hotel for nearly a month, unable to leave the capital because of travel restrictions and political and military unrest.

"Even Mike Malinowsky, who was serving as a consular officer in Kabul, warned Charles not to go, saying he didn't want any additional Americans over in Kabul to worry about and be responsible for," said his partner.

Brockunier was described as a history teacher who fell in love with the living history of feudal Afghanistan.

"He liked the kind of life over there — the bargaining over cups of tea. Over here he was a lonely person."

"I think his sense of adventure just got him in trouble," said a friend of Brockunier's. "He isn't political — he just wanted to see what was going on."

"He's been very lucky," Pergola said, visiting Afghanistan every two months or so for the last year and a half.

State Department spokesman Ron Lorton said yesterday that Brockunier had been reported to American officials only as missing in Kabul.

"We have yet to get any information from Afghan authorities about him," said Lorton. "I'm not going to get into a discussion of this case with someone from the press at this stage." Lorton declined to say who had reported Brockunier missing.

Last month, during general strikes in Kabul in which many persons were arrested and killed, the Afghan government announced that among those incarcerated were several Pakistanis and an American identified as Robert Lee. The Afghans accused Lee of being a CIA agent and warned that he could be tried on espionage charges.

United Press International yesterday quoted an American businessman arriving in New Delhi from Kabul as saying he had witnessed the arrest of an American and several Pakistanis. The businessman identified the American as a rug dealer from Boston and said he was arrested for taking photographs.

This raised the possibility that Brockunier, upon his arrest, had offered up the name of Robert Lee as an alias, but the State Department denied this.

"Brockunier is not Robert Lee to my knowledge," Lorton said. "I have heard this theory before, but we do not believe they are the same person."